

review - *I Loved Lucy* by Don Grigware / Grigware reviews

RECOMMENDED

I Loved Lucy

written by Lee Tannen
directed by Todd Weeks
Laguna Playhouse
through October 31



Based on his 2001 best seller about his relationship with the late great Lucille Ball, *I Loved Lucy* by Lee Tannen is now a one-act two character play, receiving its world premiere at Laguna Playhouse. It's a somewhat witty, but mostly bittersweet look at an aging star and how she deals with the emptiness of her later years.

Ball had such a colorful career in the 30s and 40s at MGM before becoming a TV megastar in the early fifties with *I Love Lucy*, a Desilu Production, created by her and Desi Arnaz. Her private life with children Lucy Arnaz and Desi Arnaz, Jr. was an open book and we got to know them almost as well as the lady herself in *The Lucy Show* in its various incarnations in the 60s. Her tumultuous marriage to Arnaz which ended in divorce and her second marriage to comic Gary Morton were also items of much public scrutiny. She was not only a true legend but a household phenom. In her later years while married to Morton, Lucy became a diehard backgammon player - 5/6 hours a day, and Lee Tannen, distantly related to Morton and a lifelong fan of Ball, became her game partner/close friend for over a decade.

The play is based on Tannen's time with Lucy and so we are seeing her through his eyes. It's a fairly sharp portrait, and as played by Diane J. Findlay, a right-on-target portrayal as to stance, posturing, mannerisms and as to the overall essence of the feisty, outspoken, complicated woman. Her cold stare in his direction speaks volumes. Tannen as played by Jeffry Denman is energetic, life-affirming, devoted and caring to a fault. Lucy's life, even with Morton as her comfort and security, became tedious, empty, often morose, as he often hung out with his chums, but she refused to give in and kept herself as socially engaged as possible in spite of the circumstances of older age and less visibility amongst Hollywood's upper echelon. According to Tannen, she would prefer to lounge around her Beverly Hills house all day in a robe and slippers, playing backgammon, drinking slushies and eating grilled cheese sandwiches and spam, as opposed to dressing to the nines and attending a fancy party or awards ceremony.

What seems to be missing from the play in this, its initial stage is a colorful look back at Lucy in her heyday. Young audiences, only used to seeing her in *I Love Lucy*, know little or nothing about her early film classics, her attempt at a Broadway musical *Wildcat* in the early 60s and her private social life and marriages. It would be nice to have an occasional flashback scene with Lucy and Desi - happy and unhappy - and to catch a glimpse of the real Gary Morton. There's talk but no action except the

interchanges between Tannen and Ball. There's also a large screen on stage which gets little use except to show the exterior of the Roxbury Drive home and an occasional referral to the passage of time. After the show there are a raft of visuals on the lobby screen of the real Lucille Ball and her life and career. May I suggest that this be shown onstage before the play and briefly in between scene changes. Seeing the real Ball onscreen will not destroy Findlay's richly textured portrayal and will add greatly to the amusement and mystique. Brief song and dances with Tannen and Ball are most pleasurable.



As is, the play is satisfying because of Findlay and Denman's performances, which are both laudatory and because of the humor and fervor that the gay Tannen brought to Ball's otherwise boring later life. Always the star, she relished the rare occasions of being recognized, like at the movies, and being asked for an autograph. Another asset of the play is its unsparring look at how one star hated growing old and how her survival was at times quite miserable. Not all stars were as independent as Garbo who '*vanted* so desperately to be *alone*'. One interesting aspect of Ball's demeanor, as noted by Tannen's torrid accusation, was not wanting her grandchildren around. Maybe this explains her lack of warmth in playing her screen auntie *Mame*, so often called *Maimed*.



Scenic and costume design by Bruce Goodrich are simple, functional and serve the play admirably. Todd Weeks' direction is skilled with a good sense of pace.

This is overall a very enjoyable evening for Lucy fans that will grow even better with a few changes here and there.

4 out of 5 stars